

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSO-00 NSCE-00 /026 W

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P 111111Z MAR 75

FM AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9709

S E C R E T PHNOM PENH 4413

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, PINT, MORG, CB

SUBJECT: CHANGE IN FANK LEADERSHIP AND U.S. ROLE IN CAMBODIA

REF: A. PHNOM PENH 4277

B. PHNOM PENH 4291

C. PHNOM PENH 4303

D. PHNOM PENH 4319

1. SOSTHENE FERNANDEZ MET WITH MARSHAL LON NOL YESTERDAY, MARCH 10, AND SUBMITTED HIS RESIGNATION. NO PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT HAS BEEN MADE SO FAR NOR HAS A REPLACEMENT OFFICIALLY BEEN NAMED.

2. I WOULD LIKE TO EXPLAIN TO DEPARTMENT WHY I ACTED IN THIS CRISIS THE WAY I DID. I CONCLUDED THAT WHATEVER I DID, IT WAS ESSENTIAL THAT USG NOT BE PLACED IN POSITION WHERE IT COULD BE BLAMED FOR HAVING PREVENTED GKR FROM TAKING REMEDIAL ACTION, SOMETHING I WOULD HAVE EXPOSED US TO HAD I VIGOROUSLY OPPOSED SOSTHENE FERNANDEZ'S DISMISSAL. HAD I INSISTED ON RETENTION OF SOSTHENE FERNANDEZ IN HIS POSITION, AND IF THE GKR THEN DID NOT GET THROUGH THE DRY SEASON, WE COULD LATER HAVE BEEN HELD RESPONSIBLE BY THE MARSHAL AND THE GKR FOR THEIR MILITARY FAILURE.

3. BOTH LONG BORET AND LON NOL ARE FULLY AWARE OF OUR HIGH OPINION OF SOSTHENE'S TECHNICAL MILITARY COMPETENCE AND THEY REPEATEDLY TOLD ME THAT THIS CHANGE IN FANK LEADERSHIP WAS THEIR IDEA AND, IF IT DID NOT STABILIZE

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THE SITUATION, THEY WOULD TAKE FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR IT.

4. THE ENEMY GAINED SOME GROUND IN THE STRATEGIC TUOL LEAP AREA YESTERDAY AND EFFORTS BY FANK TO COUNTERATTACK TO REGAIN THE CRITICAL GROUND LOST HAVE SO FAR BEEN UNSUCCESSFUL. OUR ASSISTANT ARMY ATTACHES WHO HAVE VISITED THE AREA SAY THIS IS PARTIALLY OWING TO A LACK OF FANK MORALE AND NOT TO A LACK OF RESOURCES. THE TROOPS DO HAVE ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIERS (M-113S) AND AMPLE AIR SUPPORT BUT IT WILL REQUIRE AGGRESSIVE WILL AND DETERMINATION TO PUSH THE ENEMY BACK AT TUOL LEAP; THIS QUALITY APPEARS TO BE MISSING. ON THE OTHER HAND, ON THE NORTHERN PERIMETER OF PHNOM PNEH, THE SITUATION HAS SOMEWHAT IMPROVED WITH THE NEWLY PROMOTED GENERAL KHY HAK, FORMER COMMANDER OF THE 11TH BRIGADE, GIVING COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP TO THE 7TH DIVISION OF WHICH HE TOOK COMMAND A COUPLE OF DAYS AGO.

5. I DO AGREE WITH THE MARSHAL AND LONG BORET THAT SOMETHING IS NEEDED TO INJECT HOPE AND A "CAN-DO" ATTITUDE INTO FANK IF IT IS TO DEFEND PHNOM PENH SUCCESSFULLY. BOTH ADDITIONAL AMERICAN MILITARY ASSISTANCE AND A GREATER COMMITMENT BY THE KHMER CIVILIAN POPULATION TO THE WAR EFFORT WILL BE NEEDED IF WE ARE TO GET THROUGH THE DRY SEASON.
DEAN

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: MILITARY PERSONNEL, PERSONNEL ASSIGNMENTS, FOREIGN POLICY POSITION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 11 MAR 1975
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: GolinoFR
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1975PHNOM04413
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Film Number: D750084-1048
From: PHNOM PENH
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1975/newtext/t19750362/aaaacdwwk.tel
Line Count: 86
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION SS
Original Classification: SECRET
Original Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 2
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: SECRET
Previous Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Reference: 75 PHNOM PENH 4277
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: GolinoFR
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 08 JUL 2003
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <08 JUL 2003 by ShawDG>; APPROVED <09 JUL 2003 by GolinoFR>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
05 JUL 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: CHANGE IN FANK LEADERSHIP AND U.S. ROLE IN CAMBODIA
TAGS: PGOV, PINT, MORG, CB, US, (SOSTHENE FERNANDEZ)
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 05 JUL 2006